MID-COAST CORRIDOR PROJECT

COASTAL CONSISTENCY CERTIFICATION

The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) and Metropolitan Transit Development Board (MTDB) propose to extend the San Diego light rail transit (LRT) system from the Old Town station on the existing light rail line north to Balboa Avenue, and to construct a new Coaster commuter rail station at Nobel Drive, along the existing Coaster commuter rail line. Improvements associated with the Balboa LRT Extension portion of the project would be located almost entirely within the existing San Diego Northern Railway (SDNR) right-of-way, which is owned by MTDB. This would enable use of an existing active freight and passenger rail corridor for expansion of LRT service, and avoid any need to displace residents or businesses, or encroach on parklands (Mission Bay Park, Tecolote Canyon) to obtain new right-of-way. The Mid-Coast Corridor Project complies with California's approved coastal zone management program and will be conducted in a manner consistent with such program.

PROJECT PURPOSE

The primary purposes of the project are to improve public transit services, provide alternatives to the automobile, and accommodate future travel demand by expanding transportation capacity in the Interstate 5/Mid-Coast Corridor, a key north-south transportation link and one of metropolitan San Diego's busiest transportation corridors. North San Diego County, the travel shed area for the Mid-Coast Corridor, has grown rapidly along the I-5 coastal strip. The rate of population growth has caused demand for utilities and services to grow, while the transportation infrastructure has seen only moderate improvements. Continued population and employment growth is projected in this area. Average daily traffic in the Corridor is expected to increase 50 percent by 2015, and Corridor congestion is expected to increase substantially. Nearly three-fourths of the 119 lane miles on I-5 in the Corridor were operating under congested conditions (defined as Level of Service E or F) in 1997. All lane miles in the Corridor are expected to be operating under congested conditions in the year 2015. The Mid-Coast Corridor Project would address these deficiencies in the roadway system and defer or reduce the need for new highway widening projects, by adding more than 12,000 daily boardings to the LRT and Coaster rail systems.

As part of this project, new coastal access via public transit would be provided at Mission Bay Park. Impacts to environmentally sensitive habitat areas have been avoided or minimized by locating the LRT alignment and station platforms within existing, operational railroad right-of-way. Impacts to the Coastal Zone could not be completely avoided because (as shown on the Project Location Map, Attachment A) the east limits of the right-of-way also form the east boundary of the Coastal Zone along the Balboa Extension alignment, and the LRT extension would need to cross the San Diego River to provide access to the growing Mid-Coast Corridor. There is no practicable alternative outside the Coastal Zone, due to constraints related to available right-of-way, topography,

roadways, development, and existing laws and regulations regarding the protection of parks and open space.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Balboa LRT Alignment. The Balboa LRT Extension would begin south of the San Diego River, where it would diverge from the Mission Valley LRT line, and continue north on a new bridge over the San Diego River and Friars Road, parallel to and east of the existing SDNR tracks. It would pass under Tecolote Road and Clairemont Drive, then over Balboa Avenue, where it would terminate.

LRT Stations. Three new LRT stations are proposed, at Tecolote Road, Clairemont Drive, and Balboa Avenue, with all station platforms in existing right-of-way (and therefore in the Coastal Zone). All station parking would be outside the Coastal Zone (see Project Plans, Attachment B). At Tecolote Station, the station platforms would be under the Tecolote Road bridge. Clairemont Station would be located under the Clairemont Drive bridge. Modifications to this bridge would occur at its intersection with the northbound ramps to I-5, and a Project Study Report/Project Report that addresses these modifications is being prepared according to Caltrans requirements. Public access to Mission Bay and Mission Bay Park would be provided via an elevator and stairs at the north end of the station platform. To further facilitate this access, the sidewalk on the north side of Clairemont Drive would be widened and pedestrian ramps would be constructed at intersections. Bus bays for existing express bus routes would also be provided on the Clairemont Drive bridge, to facilitate connections with the LRT service. Balboa Station would include a pedestrian walkway on the LRT bridge over Balboa Avenue (located partly in the Coastal Zone) to facilitate pedestrian access between the station and the surrounding community.

Structures and Traction Power. Three bridges would be included in the Balboa Extension, at crossings of the San Diego River/Friars Road, Tecolote Creek, and Balboa Avenue. All bridges would be located within existing SDNR right-of-way and therefore within the Coastal Zone. The San Diego River/Friars Road bridge would be a reinforced concrete box girder bridge, approximately 900 feet long and less than 30 feet wide, with all footings of its nine columns outside the river's low flow channel (see Project Plans, Attachment B). The new bridge columns would be aligned with those of the existing SDNR bridge to the west to minimize impacts to water flows. Column footings are typically 8 to 9 feet in diameter. The Tecolote Creek bridge, also a concrete box girder less than 30 feet wide, would span Tecolote Creek with no encroachment in the floodway. The length of this span would be approximately 60 feet. The Balboa Avenue bridge would be nearly 12 meters wide, to include a three-meter wide pedestrian walkway.

Five traction power substations would be required along the right-of-way to feed electricity from the San Diego Gas and Electric power system to the LRT overhead catenary system. Due to topographical constraints in the Clairemont Station area (Attachment B), one substation would be located in the Coastal Zone, between the SDNR tracks and I-5.

Nobel Drive Commuter Rail Station. The Nobel Coaster Station would be located outside the Coastal Zone, on the south side of Nobel Drive, east of Towne Centre Drive, approximately 3 miles from the coast, and 2.5 miles inland of the Coastal Zone boundary. It would be located on vacant land currently owned by the City of San Diego.

RELEVANT COASTAL ACT POLICIES

Article 2 - Public Access (Sections 30210-30214)

The project conforms with the public access objectives of the California Coastal Act by providing improved public access to Mission Bay and Mission Bay Park from the proposed Clairemont LRT Station, via an elevator and stairs at the north end of the station platform. To further facilitate this access, the sidewalk on the north side of Clairemont Drive would be widened and pedestrian ramps would be constructed at intersections. This crossing provides convenient access to Mission Bay Park's main visitor center, which is located across I-5 from Clairemont Station. The option has been preserved to construct future direct pedestrian access to Mission Bay Park, though funding constraints prevent inclusion in the present project. This direct public access to Mission Bay Park from the Clairemont Station will provide new access to the Coastal Zone via LRT, including the lines serving San Diego County, and bus routes that provide feeder service to LRT stations.

Article 4 - Marine Environment (Sections 30230-30237)

Given the location of the SDNR right-of-way, some impact to wetlands from project facilities in the Coastal Zone would be unavoidable. This impact would be mitigated and offset by the additional transportation capacity afforded by extended LRT service. As a cost competitive alternative to the private auto, LRT would divert auto trips from heavily traveled roadways, deferring future widening of the I-5 bridge over the San Diego River, which would result in additional impacts to wetlands. Deferring highway widening projects also offers air quality benefits.

A total of 0.66 acre of impacts (including both temporary and permanent impacts) to wetlands and other waters of the U.S. would occur within the Coastal Zone at the San Diego River crossing and along the Balboa Extension alignment, as described below and detailed in the Updated Biology Technical Report, Attachment F. In addition, 0.054 acre of wetland impacts would occur at the Tecolote Station parking lot, outside the Coastal Zone, and 0.115 acre of wetland impacts would occur at Nobel Drive Station, approximately 2.5 miles inland from the Coastal Zone. As described in the Alternatives Analysis, Attachment C, there is no less damaging practicable alternative.

San Diego River Crossing. Bridge shading, column footings, and temporary construction activities would result in 0.58 acre of impacts to southern cottonwood-willow riparian forest in this area. Additionally, 0.06 acre of impacts would occur to other waters of the U.S., due to bridge shading and temporary construction impacts. It is not possible to construct a crossing of the San Diego River floodway without some impact to wetland/riparian vegetation. It was determined during the preliminary engineering phase of

the project that a clear span bridge at this location was not feasible. This determination emanated from the bridge type selection study prepared in accordance with Caltrans practice. The type selection study found it was not feasible to expand the existing railroad bridge, and, due to the overhead constraints of Interstate 8 (south of the San Diego River crossing), it was not feasible to construct a clear span since the depth of the superstructure would be too great to clear the 100 year flood elevation. Still, every effort has been made to avoid and minimize impacts to riparian habitat and waters. The nine LRT bridge columns would be aligned with those of the existing SDNR bridge, and would not encroach within the river's low flow channel. To the greatest extent practicable substructure construction would be conducted during the dry season, and outside the breeding season of special status species.

Balboa LRT Extension Area. Impacts to 0.03 acre of other waters of the U.S. would occur in the Coastal Zone in this area, due to shading from the span over Tecolote Creek and extensions of storm drain culverts beneath the new LRT track. Alteration of Tecolote Creek would be avoided by constructing a single span bridge over the creek. In areas outside the limits of the Coastal Zone, impacts would occur to coastal brackish marsh wetlands (0.04 acre) and freshwater marsh wetlands (0.014 acre) at the site of the Tecolote Station parking lot.

Nobel Drive Coaster Station. A total of 0.115 acre of wetland impacts would result from the Nobel Drive Coaster Station (0.07 acre riparian, 0.04 acre southern sycamore-alder riparian, and 0.005 acre freshwater marsh). Since this site is approximately 2.5 miles inland of the Coastal Zone boundary, wetlands impacts in this area would not affect resources in the Coastal Zone.

Mitigation of Wetland Impacts. The project will avoid or minimize impacts to wetland habitats where such avoidance is practicable, or mitigate impacts to achieve no net loss. Impacts to wetlands and other waters of the U.S. will be mitigated by creating or restoring wetlands to compensate for the loss of these habitats. As determined through consultation with the California Coastal Commission and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE), mitigation will be consistent with ACOE's no net loss criterion, as detailed in the Updated Biology Technical Report, Attachment F.

Wetland mitigation on-site will occur at the LRT San Diego River crossing. This will consist of restoration of areas affected by temporary construction within the project limits. In addition, special measures will be considered to salvage and replant existing vegetation in order to preserve, as much as possible, the existing canopy and shrub cover.

As detailed in Attachment F, off-site wetland impacts will be mitigated by wetland creation or restoration at one or more of three sites: Tecolote Canyon, the Handlery Site, and the Tijuana River Valley. As part of the permit process with the CCC, ACOE, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and the City of San Diego, the conceptual mitigation plan details all impacts to wetland habitats and specifies either in-kind replacement of habitat prior to the initiation of construction or mitigation after initiation of construction at higher replacement ratios. The objective of the revegetation effort will be to create quality riparian habitat wherever possible, because this habitat provides the highest benefit to

wildlife species. MTDB shall submit a final mitigation plan to the CCC, ACOE, USFWS and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) for review and final approval.

Article 5 - Land Resources (Sections 30240-30244)

The project minimizes impacts to environmentally sensitive areas and disruption of habitat values, because it is located within existing, active railroad right-of-way. Environmentally sensitive habitats, other than wetland areas, that would be affected by the project include coastal sage scrub habitat and non-native grassland that provide foraging areas for raptors. A total of 0.29 acres of coastal sage scrub habitat located in the SDNR right-of-way in the Coastal Zone would be affected, in an area north of the proposed Clairemont Station. As described in the Updated Biology Technical Report, Attachment F, this area is small in size and degraded in condition, and it is unlikely to support sensitive species (California gnatcatcher and San Diego black-tailed jackrabbit) associated with this habitat type. Outside the Coastal Zone, in the Nobel Drive Coaster Station area, a total of 3.45 acres of coastal sage scrub and non-native grassland would be affected by the project.

Mitigation of Impacts to Environmentally Sensitive Habitats. Mitigation for impacts to coastal sage scrub (including the degraded area in the right-of-way north of Clairemont Station) and non-native grasslands will occur at ratios prescribed by the San Diego Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP). Ratios will range from 1:1 to 1.5:1, depending on whether the mitigation site is located within a preservation area designated by the MSCP. MTDB will purchase area credits from a USFWS-approved mitigation bank, located in the City of San Diego, that has been established in accordance with the Official Policy on Conservation Banks (California Resources Agencies, 1995) and the Supplemental Policy regarding Conservation Banks with the NCCP Area of Southern California (USFWS and CDFG, 1996).

Article 6 - Development (Sections 30250-30255)

The project demonstrates consistency with Section 30252 of the California Coastal Act, by enhancing public access through the extension of transit (LRT) service to Mission Bay Park. The provision of transit to this area is of particular value given existing congestion. According to the Mission Bay Park Master Plan Update (City of San Diego, August 2, 1994), "At peak times, the current infrastructure of roadways, paths and parking areas is over-taxed, resulting in congestion and reduced access to the Park" (page 99). The master plan adds that, "Coordination with MTDB should be exercised to ensure the optimum pedestrian and bicycle access to the Park (possibly over I-5 from the future planned light rail station)" (page 118). The LRT will provide an additional means of accessing the Coastal Zone and in particular provides an uncongested means during the peak summer months when the surrounding road and parking infrastructure is congested.

The project is expected to reduce regional vehicle miles traveled (VMT) and energy consumption, consistent with Section 30253 of the Act. As detailed in Attachment D, traffic projections show a regional decrease of 83,300 VMT resulting from the project in year 2015, when compared with the No-Build Alternative. As shown in Attachment E, reductions in VMT would result in overall reductions in energy consumed for

transportation purposes. The reduction in energy consumed by non-transit motor vehicles is projected to be approximately 145.5 billion British thermal units (Btu's) annually. A secondary effect of reduced traffic, roadway congestion, and parking requirements would be a decrease in auto emissions and a concomitant improvement in air quality in this federal non-attainment area for ozone and a state non-attainment area for ozone and particulates. The Mid-Coast Corridor Project, Balboa Extension and Nobel Drive Coaster station is included in SANDAG's current Regional Transportation Plan (RTP), 1996, and is in conformity with the State Implementation Plan for air quality attainment. Further, the project is included as a component of the San Diego Air District's 1992 Regional Air Quality Strategy.

The project is consistent with the City of San Diego's planning guidelines and policies as stated in the Community Planning Area Plans governing the project area. It has also been endorsed by the City of San Diego, and the following local planning organizations: Pacific Beach Community Planning Committee, Clairemont Mesa Planning Committee, and University Community Planning Group. The certified Land Use Plan for the Mission Bay Local Community Plan (LCP) has also structured parking requirements for the southwest section of Mission Bay Park to facilitate development of LRT stations in this area.

LIST OF ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A: Project Location Map
Attachment B: Project Plans
Attachment C: Alternatives Analysis
Attachment D: Transportation Analysis (from Administrative Draft of FEIS)
Attachment E: Energy Analysis (from Administrative Draft of FEIS)
Attachment F: Updated Biology Technical Report